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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 002391

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SUBJECT: IDP AND REFUGEE RETURNS CONTINUE IN BAGHDAD, BUT
MASSIVE RETURNS FAIL TO MATERIALIZE

REF: BAGHDAD 2227

Classified By: Baghdad PRT Leader John Bass for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (U) This is a Baghdad PRT reporting cable.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Summary: Since late 2007, the UN estimates that 110,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees have returned to Iraq, primarily to Baghdad. However, the UN concedes that return data are not precise, particularly as not all returnees are registering with the GOI. Improved security, exhausted savings, and tighter entry restrictions and legal residency requirements in neighboring countries led many displaced families to return. Significant numbers of returnees, however, have found their homes occupied by others or badly damaged and have ended up in secondary displacement.

Notably, most returns to Baghdad occurred in the outlying areas of the province with little or no Government of Iraq (GOI) involvement. Although the Ministry of Displacement and Migration (MoDM) expects to receive \$208 million from the GOI's supplemental budget to facilitate the return of 100,000 IDP and refugee families to Iraq this summer, there is no evidence that large numbers of returns to Baghdad are forthcoming. Lingering security concerns, squatters in many displaced families, homes, and destroyed property continue to stymie large returns, particularly to the metropolitan areas of Baghdad.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Summary Cont,: One success story is the Saydiya neighborhood of Baghdad City where a Prime Ministerial initiative facilitated the return of roughly 1,800 families of a total 6,000 displaced families since March 2008. However, the unique circumstances of Saydiya) effective security, absence of militias, large numbers of unoccupied homes and the well off demographic of the displaced population -- indicate that the Saydiya example will not likely be replicated elsewhere in Baghdad. Moreover, continued insecurity, the lack of a clear policy on evictions and a severe shortage of housing all temper the pace of returns. End Summary.

IDP and Refugee Returns in Baghdad Limited in Scope

[1](#)4. (SBU) The MoDM reports that roughly 20,000 families (about 120,000 individuals) have returned to their homes in Baghdad since late 2007. (Note: this figure is likely lower than actual returns due to low registration rates and data lag. End note.) Returns occurred primarily in the outlying rural areas of the province (the &qadas8 or counties) rather than the nine urban districts of the city where large numbers of displacement occurred. Two factors explain this trend. First, the outlying areas saw fewer squatters move in behind IDPs and refugees who fled because Baghdadis considered these areas too dangerous. When security improved in late 2007 as a result of the Coalition 'surge' and local Iraqi security volunteers (Sons of Iraq), many displaced residents decided to return before other occupants had the opportunity to move in. Secondly, relatively few homes in the qadas as opposed to the city were damaged to the point where they were

uninhabitable.

Taji Qada: Large Number of Returns, But Problems Remain

15. (SBU) Within the rural qadas of Baghdad Province, most returns occurred in the city of Sab Al-Bour in Taji Qada. Tens of thousands of residents fled after AQI-linked militants and Jaysh Al-Mahdi (JAM) militia carried out attacks in the area in 2006 and 2007. Only 350 families (around 2,000 individuals) of the city's 60,000 predominantly Shia population stayed behind. Residents fled primarily to neighboring (also Shia) Kadhamiya District. According to ePRT-5, approximately 5,800 families (about 35,000 individuals) returned to Sab Al-Bour in recent months. Returns to Sab Al-Bour were facilitated by several factors, those being: many homes vacated by the displaced were not occupied by squatters; serious property damage was relatively limited; and many of the displaced fled collectively to a neighboring district. This made returns easier from a political, logistic, and humanitarian standpoint.

16. (SBU) Despite some successful returns to Sab Al-Bour, there remain hindrances. Sab Al-Bour IDPs who sought refuge in neighboring Kadhamiya District to the south told Baghdad PRT in March that residents who have not returned are reluctant to do so because local Sunni Sons of Iraq (SOIs) participated in the violence that caused them to flee. These IDPs will not return to Sab Al-Bour if those responsible for guaranteeing their security are the same people who drove them from their homes. Many of the Sab Al-Bour IDPs also believe that SOIs will force returnees to be displaced again

BAGHDAD 00002391 002 OF 003

when US forces &stop paying them.8 Further problematic is the fact that several Sab Al-Bour residents occupied homes vacated by other IDPs in areas such as Kadhamiya's Hurriya neighborhood, where tensions are rising with the host community. The general position therein is that Kadhamiya should no longer provide services to Sab Al-Bour residents because it is now safe enough for them to return home. In this case community leaders are studying ways to facilitate the return of the IDPs before the situation turns violent.

Baghdad City: The Special Case of Saydiya

17. (SBU) Until early 2008, Saydiya was among Baghdad City's most dangerous neighborhoods. Situated adjacent to the Bayaa neighborhood in Rashid District (a Shia area dominated by JAM) and the Risala neighborhood (a predominantly Sunni area infiltrated by AQI and other Sunni extremist groups), Saydiya was the scene of a turf war between Sunni and Shia militants.

Residents were educated professionals, including former regime military officers, university professors and doctors) a demographic that could afford to flee and was unlikely to form militias to defend itself in place. Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) cleared the area house-by-house in late 2007 and early 2008, driving out militants and gangs and seizing weapons caches. As the area stabilized, hundreds of IDPs and opportunistic secondary occupants from other areas settled in homes vacated by those who had fled Saydiya.

In January 2008, Coalition Forces completed a concrete wall surrounding Saydiya's four muhallas to prevent militants and gangs from re-entering the area. The wall has only one access point controlled by ISF and vehicles and individuals entering the checkpoint are searched for weapons and contraband. The improvements in security prompted calls from IDPs to return to the Saydiya neighborhood.

18. (SBU) Enter the Saydiya Support Council*an unelected body that essentially replaced the long-dysfunctional Saydiya neighborhood council. The Prime Minister-appointed Implementation and Follow-Up Committee for National Reconciliation (IFCNR) sanctioned the formation of the Saydiya Support Council in late 2007 to assist the

neighborhood council that had stopped functioning after the death, displacement, and incarceration of many of its council members. IFCNR empowered the council to address IDP returns, coordinate with the Coalition and ISF to improve security, and address problems with essential services. Amid dramatic security improvements, the Support Council and IFCNR initiated a process to facilitate returns to Saydiya through media outlets and word-of-mouth to encourage those displaced to contact the Support Council to indicate their interest in returning. The Saydiya Council requested that returning residents provide supporting documentation to show they were from the area, including their identity cards, residence cards, and copies of their deeds. The Support Council and IFCNR verified deeds with the deed registration office, and ISF inspected homes to make sure they were inhabitable and not occupied by secondary occupants. Support Council members contacted those whose homes were inhabitable and vacant and provided them with a date to return. The first round of returns took place on March 15.

19. (SBU) The Support Council reports that approximately 1,800 IDP and refugee families of an estimated 6,000 total displaced have returned to Saydiya since March 2008*an amount that far exceeds returns to any other area in Baghdad City. In May, the council continued to facilitate the return of an average 20 families per day with highs reaching in excess of 55 households per day. The council reported a handful of threats against the earliest returnees in March and April, but said there were no attacks or threats against returnees in May or June. Returning households appear to represent a solid mix of Shia and Sunnis, with the balance weighted toward Sunnis. According to the Support Council, squatters and IDPs from other areas continue to occupy at least 1,500 houses, with legitimate IDPs in about 30 percent of those homes. The remaining squatters are opportunists who either do not own homes or own more modest homes elsewhere. The council claims some of these opportunistic squatters participated in displacing Saydiya's original residents and their ongoing presence undermines further returns because residents consider their presence potentially threatening. The Support Council is engaged in efforts to persuade these unwelcome occupants to leave and report some success in this regard. (Note: the council does believe that referring cases to the courts will help. While Iraq's civil courts are deciding property and eviction cases, the Ministry of Justice's execution offices and the ISF have only episodically acted to enforce such orders. The Director General for the Office of Execution indicated that fear of reprisal and inaction on the part of the ISF is the principal reasons for this failure. End note.)

BAGHDAD 00002391 003 OF 003

Comment: Saydiya Example Not Easily Duplicated Elsewhere

10. (SBU) The successful returns initiative in Saydiya generated interest across Baghdad on how to duplicate the experience. However, the Saydiya experience will not easily be replicated elsewhere. First, access to the area is strictly controlled by concrete walls and checkpoints, which allowed Coalition and ISF to make the area one of the safest in Baghdad City. Second, most homes vacated by the displaced were not occupied by squatters or destroyed, which makes returns significantly less complicated. Third, high level interest from the GOI and Coalition in the Saydiya initiative translated into material support in the form of grants directly from the Prime Minister's office to returning families and CERP funds to aid community and Support Council initiatives. Such levels of interest and funding will likely be difficult to generate again as provincial elections approach. Finally, the educated, wealthy demographic of Saydiya likely helped facilitate returns because residents are more accustomed to living in a mixed neighborhood and less likely to resort to violence or form militias to solve disputes.

¶11. (C) Comment Cont,: MoDM's efforts to secure funds to facilitate large scale returns illustrate a more active ministry role, but it is unclear if the ministry is equipped to spend such large sums. Moreover, not all of these funds will support returns, as MODM plans to use a portion of its supplemental appropriation to pay stipends to 115,000 needy IDPs. MoDM unveiled the GOI National Policy on Displacement at the July 8-9 Conference on Displacement in Baghdad (reftel 2227). The policy) four years in the making) was drafted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and USAID-funded NGO, International Medical Corps (IMC), in cooperation with the MoDM. The policy is a broad statement of the rights and needs of the displaced and of the GOI,s responsibilities and commitments to address them; but it is not an implementation plan. The GOI will have to work in concert as it struggles to address practical and pressing displacement issues such as evicting squatters; compensating displaced families for damaged and destroyed property; and maintaining the level of security, services, and economic opportunity necessary to make returns feasible and sustainable. End comment.

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